

The background of the cover is a deep purple color with a rough, cracked, and textured appearance, resembling stone or aged parchment. The top and bottom edges of this purple section are irregular and torn, revealing a plain white background underneath.

# *Encounters with Christ*

*Book 1*

LENTEN  
DEVOTIONS  
FOR 2023

GRACE  
LU<sup>+</sup>HERAN  
CHURCH  
& SCHOOL



## ***Encounters with Christ***

Our Lenten theme this year is *Encounters with Christ*. Our readings for worship through the season present us with encounters various people have with Jesus throughout his ministry. After his encounter with Satan in the wilderness, we'll see Nicodemus come to Jesus at night and an unnamed woman whom he meets during the day. Jesus will meet a man born blind, then he'll meet Mary and Martha in their grief and Lazarus in his grave. Finally, Jesus will encounter the powers of this world head on. Sin, evil, and death will look to win the day. They will fail.

As we walk once more toward the cross and the empty tomb, we'll read daily devotions prepared by members of the Grace community. You will read powerful stories of how our writers have been encountered by Christ along life's journey and deep insights into the biblical witness.

Our prayer for you, dear people of Grace, is that this season one of deep meaning for you. Like Nicodemus and the woman at the well, like the man born blind and Lazarus, we are changed by the encounter. We are born again. We are gifted the water of life. We develop eyes to see all that God is doing. We all called forth from our graves and stripped of us graveclothes, clothed instead with the righteousness of Christ.

As Christ encounters you anew throughout Lent, may you feel his promised presence in your life, preparing us for the great feast of Easter when his presence will be all in all.

Matthew 6:20-21  
Wednesday, February 22  
Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

*But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

I received a phone call from a student's mother who was at her wit's end. She didn't know what to do with her son, who she felt had been seriously damaged by a program the college sponsored, and she wanted some answers and some help in dealing with the changes she was seeing in him. My student had been in Africa doing development work for an NGO during a six-month stint sponsored by a program at the college. From a well-situated suburban family, he had seen for the first-time starvation and disease, abject poverty, and a neediness which opened his eyes and his soul to what he had never considered before. His response, on returning home, was to take everything in his bedroom—clothes from his closet, from the bureau drawers, trophies he had won at sports, academic awards, radio, CD player, all other electronics—and pile it in one gigantic heap on his bed. He said to his mother that she needed to help him get rid of the stuff of his former life, that it didn't make sense to him now that he knew how most of the world lived. He wanted only one change of clothes, a few books, and nothing more.

This young man was beginning to understand what Luther meant when he wrote: "Those people are most fortunate who do not possess many treasures, for they do not have to support many rats and need not fear thieves." But I knew this boy. He had other treasures: a sensitive spirit, a love of God, a desire to reach the suffering, a faith in things unseen, things not subject to rust or moths, things that thieves cannot steal. Give him time, I advised his mother. With her guidance he would see that his material blessings are not abominations but are meant to be shared and that his spiritual blessings are also to be used to allay the suffering of others.

*Lord, you have given us much. Help us to use our gifts to help others who need them. And to see our worldly goods as gifts from you to be used for others. Amen*

Psalm 51:10

Thursday, February 23

Michael Costello

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

A friend of mine told me about a dream they had several years ago in which they purchased a new heart on the illegal market for an ailing family member. As odd as this dream might sound, the image is one worth thinking about as we pray part of Psalm 51, the appointed Psalm for Ash Wednesday: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." In earlier verses of the Psalm the psalmist also prays to God: "Have mercy on me," "Wash me," and "Purge me." There is a recognition on the part of the psalmist that sin and evil are things from which one must be purified. This is the truth we speak of during the season of Lent: We need a new heart.

The market for a new heart has a new economic reality; there is only the gift of new life in Christ, the one who gave himself up to death on a cross for us and for our salvation. Because of Jesus' sacrificial love for each of us we need not wonder where and how to find a clean heart for ourselves. Through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection our sin is forgiven, and our hearts have been fashioned anew as a free and undeserved gift from God. This new heart we have been given cannot be purchased; it has been won for us by Christ's death, once and for all.

Trusting that God is doing a good work in us even now, we are empowered to share the gift of his new life with others. We do this by how we show up in the world, offering ourselves in service to our neighbor and treating those with whom we live and work with compassion. Ultimately, as Christ's body, we are called to love as he first loved us—by showing mercy, even to the point of laying down our lives for the sake of those in need.

*Almighty God,  
Create in us new and honest hearts, that we may bear witness to the love you have given us through  
your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Joel 2:13  
Friday, February 24  
Julie Hinz

*Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,  
and he relents from sending calamity.*

After college, when I was free to make my own decisions about church and faith, and no longer bound by the rules of my parents' home, church became a periodic activity. I did not need their faith. I needed my own. I knew there was more to faith than I understood, but the constant reminder of my sin became a barrier that reinforced my unworthiness and my deep sense of being unlovable.

It was during this time of self-doubt and unworthiness I encountered the God around which my faith is now centered. I was lovingly scolded by a friend: "I get that you don't believe this, but you are loved. At some point you're just gonna have to accept that as the truth. I'll remind you until you can believe it for yourself." That moment echoes in my head. I had been truly seen. My friend acknowledged my state of being, and invited me to explore those hard feelings. It opened the door to honest and open questioning and learning while being safe in the knowledge that I could return and still be a beloved child of God.

It was through this friend's constant reminder that I finally came to know a God who loved me, who wanted to walk with me, who loved me beyond measure. A God who was not angry at my wandering but loved me and my questions and doubts, who welcomed me back time and again not because I was worthy or had learned some valuable lesson in my wandering but because, to God, I had always belonged with him.

No matter how many times I wander away or find myself lost and distant from God, the door is always open for me to return, the path back is always clearly marked so I can return easily to the arms of my Savior.

*Blessed Lord, thank you for your constant invitation to return to your loving embrace no matter how far we seem to wander. Amen.*

2 Corinthians 5:20  
Saturday, February 25  
Laura Merwin

*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

To be an ambassador—now, as in Paul's time—is to be respected and well-connected. It is to be favored by a ruler—even in our democracy, ambassadors are presidential appointees and often reflect deep personal and political interconnections. But to be an ambassador is also to be a servant, albeit one of high place. A good ambassador, by definition, never acts in self-interest, but only and always as a representative of a higher power.

To be an ambassador is also to only rarely directly encounter the power one represents. The meaningful acts of an ambassador necessarily take place at a distance—one must leave one's homeland (one may try to take comfort in the idea that an embassy is "home soil," but history shows that this is little more than a polite legal fiction). More, to be an ambassador is to act for a power even—especially—when one cannot communicate with that power. Ambassadors have always been chosen because they can be trusted to be the hand and voice of the absent. This is why being an ambassador is such a great and terrible responsibility.

And so, while there can be significant perks of ambassadorship—a beautiful residence, diplomatic immunity, garden parties with lots of champagne—there is also great potential for fear and loneliness. On foreign, possibly hostile soil, far from home and allies, an ambassador must sometimes feel an overwhelming desolation.

And don't we feel this way, sometimes, as ambassadors of Christ? We are asked to continuously represent our sovereign, even when we feel uncertain, alone, unsure of our precise instructions or exact remit, even in the darkest moments when we feel totally abandoned or doubt our own capacity for loyalty. (After all, earthly ambassadors have sometimes woken to find themselves representing countries that, overnight, have ceased to exist. And we've never even visited ours - perhaps it was never there?)

C.S. Lewis says in *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter 8, God is most happy with us when we do his will at moments we feel his presence the least. It is easy—or easier, at least—to represent a sovereign when we are receiving regular dispatches, when we feel his attention and regard and understand clearly his instructions. But the most valuable ambassadors are those who cling to the identity of their lord even when separated by distance, silence, war, or doubt, trusting their homeland remains inviolate and they will travel there when their task is done.

*Lord, please help us to faithfully act as your hand and your voice until we may be ultimately reconciled to you. Amen.*

Psalm 32:7  
Sunday, February 26  
Rev. Troy Medlin

*You are my hiding place;  
you will protect me from trouble  
and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

There was no place like my grandparents' house growing up. Walking in the door of their house at the corner of Constitution and Lowell it felt like all the troubles of life would melt away and be left outside. There I could truly rest. It was as if just the unique aroma caused a deep breath to exhale from the lungs. It was one of my hiding places. A shelter where things were okay no matter what was swirling around out in the world or in my heart.

Both as young people and adults we crave those kinds of spaces. They are like mini escapes from the heartache and the pressures of this fallen and broken world. The problem is of course, all these oases are only temporary. The troubles and burdens we carry, whatever they are, are still real and lurking. They always greet us again whether we are ready for them or not.

This Psalm reminds us that the most secure and enduring hiding spot is not a place but a person. The one the psalmist speaks of is the one who created all things and who has come among us in Jesus Christ. He has stretched out his arms of love upon the cross, and those of us who have been born from his wounded side can find a home in his embrace. Carried in his arms of love we know that the troubles that we face are not the end. For Christ will bring us through every death into life. In each twist and turn he leads us to that dwelling place where all are safe at last. And all along that path we are kept. Our wounded and risen Savior is our hiding place. There we can breathe for we know the future. Not even death's arrows can harm us anymore. As his body on earth, may we become a hiding place for others and a refuge for those in need.

*God of mercy, may we find our hiding place in your wounded and risen body. Safe in your hands we are kept safe from death's power. Preserve us as people who offer refuge to all in your name until our Lenten cries of deliverance are transformed into shouts of Easter praise. Amen.*

Genesis 2:16-17  
Monday, February 27  
Karl Reko

*And the Lord God commanded the man. You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat; for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*

As a child involved with learning things in school every day, it never made sense to me why Adam and Eve weren't supposed to eat a fruit that let them learn what was right and wrong. However, this is a story about much more than apples. It has to do with a problem initiated by Adam and Eve which is still with us.

Seventeen verses before the verses above we are told that there were not one, but two trees involved. In addition to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there was also a tree of life. The knowledge of good and evil is tied to the tree of life. This is not a story about morality. It's talking about knowledge of the divine plan of God that lies behind life and death, a plan that involves life and immortality. This plan is God's business, not ours. When Eve and Adam violated the use of those trees, they were trying to be like God. We still try to be like God whenever we assume that we, and not God, have the plan, are in control of our lives and to maintain that control, must be perfect.

Our encounter with our Lord Jesus frees us from the burden of always trying to be in control and perfect. Lack of control is not deflating but is daily Good News. This season of Lent is all about the relief that we experience when we acknowledge our uncontrolled imperfection and thus remember that God is in charge. We don't have to be perfect in school. We don't have to be perfect children or parents or spouses. We don't have to be perfect employees or employers. We don't have to be in perfect health and afraid of losing control when we are sick and die. A loving and good God is in charge of all that.

I'm not given to miraculous messages from God, but I once had a dream that I can't explain any other way. It had been one of the worst weeks possible. All I was hearing was bad news and accusations against me, including my own. I gave up in despair. That night I dreamed I was floating in space in a peaceful and beautiful weightlessness. A calming and warm voice came out of the void and simply said, "It's okay." Even though my little world was crashing, the voice told me that there was a larger picture in which God is in control, and therefore I was okay. I woke up feeling inside a peace from God beyond reason and understanding.

Our encounter is with God's Son who forgives our imperfection and lets us live in gratitude because we live forgiven and free in God's world.

*Good and loving God, thank you for your peace which passes all understanding. Amen.*



Matthew 4:1-2

Tuesday, February 28

Anonymous

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.*

I remember a night when I was quite young. My parents were gone away, and my elder siblings were to make dinner for my younger brother and me. It was summer, I was out in the neighborhood and did not hear the call to come for dinner. When the sun began to set, I went home to find dinner cleaned up and nothing left. My parents still laugh at the emphatic note I left, informing them that "THEY DID NOT SAVE ME ANY DINNER!" and I had to go to bed hungry.

My reaction in the moment was rather dramatic (admittedly, my reactions can often be dramatic!) I was certain I was going to die of starvation, and blame would be placed on my siblings. But let's be honest, I was not abused and left hungry. I was not living in poverty and that was my very last chance for a meal. I would get breakfast and all the meals after that.

And here we encounter Jesus; sitting in the desert, waiting for forty days, anticipating what is to come, fasting, praying. "And he was hungry." What an understatement in human terms.

Here we encounter the divinely incarnate God. Jesus is 100% human in his hunger and 100% divine, full of the Spirit of God. Jesus is full, filled to overflowing with those aspects of the divine that allow the human aspects to be simply "hungry" and rest in the Father's plan.

How many times have I sat in a literal desert with no sustenance? Never. How many times have I sat in the figurative desert thirsting and hungering, hoping for God to provide the nourishment I desperately need? Often. But here in Matthew, I realize that God has always been there with me. I need not fear being left wanting. The Spirit is constantly filling me up with all I need to continue to do God's work in the world.

*Thank you, loving God, for constantly filling us with your Spirit that we might fight temptation, wait patiently for your plan, and work toward the salvation of the world. Amen.*

Matthew 4:4:3-4  
Wednesday, March 1  
Susie Calhoun

*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*

*Jesus answered, "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Not a big ask, just some bread, something to eat after forty days of fasting. The devil is named in an earlier verse, and it seems that the devil wisely begins the temptation of Jesus with something very "human," food. Later in v.3 the name tempter is used. One of my bibles explains the word tempter as the name of a personal will, actively hostile to God.

Being human, Jesus had to have been weak from hunger, so this first test was right on target. But the devil didn't figure that being also God, his personal will was one with God, not hostile to God. Jesus made it clear that he would not put his personal needs first.

I have thought of these verses as a warning that temptations will not always be to do acts of immoral or illegal conduct, but also to make quiet, innocuous decisions or do deeds that can go unnoticed.

Each one's temper will be something different and it can change depending on the circumstances. Jesus shows us how we can fight the "tempter" that is a part of each of us. He uses the Word of God! When we feel that indecision that is filled with thoughts of "I deserve this, just this once, or let someone else take care of this," go to God's Word, ask for direction from the Holy Spirit. I have a devotion book that constantly reminds me to walk close to God. Let God take the lead on indecision and keep the tempter at bay.

*Dear God, help us to remember the many ways that Jesus shows how to live as His disciples. Guide us to walk close to him to overcome our tempter. In Christ's name, Amen*

Matthew 4:5-7  
Thursday, March 2  
Dave Kluge

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*"He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*

*Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

In February of 1964 the boxing world was shocked when Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammed Ali) defeated Sonny Liston for the heavyweight championship. He wouldn't let us forget how great a boxer he was. He would frequently remind us saying, "I'm the greatest!" Was he a narcissist, egotistical, grandstanding, or worse?

Before answering that question, we would do well to look at ourselves. How many times haven't we had the same attitude in relation to others. It's part of who we are; a product of our sinful human nature. All of us want to be "the greatest."

When the devil tempted Eve to eat fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden he said, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it...you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4-5) That is, you'll be able to choose for yourself what's good or evil. Not much has changed since then.

At the start of his ministry Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He had just resisted the temptation to turn a stone into bread when the devil took him to the top of the temple. The tempter wanted Jesus to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple to demonstrate his greatness and thereby win a large following of people. One might paraphrase the devil's words to our Lord: *Show the people how great you are! Jump down!*

Jesus chose another path. He emptied himself of his glory and chose the road to Calvary. He didn't do it for himself. He did it for us, we who by our sin stand at the foot of the cross crying out, "Come down! And then we'll believe!" Because he chose not to come down, we find forgiveness and life through him.

*Lord God, we confess that time and again we have elevated ourselves at the expense of others. Forgive us and by your Holy Spirit equip us for a life of humble service to those in need. To you alone be the glory. We ask this in the name of him who did not come down from the pinnacle of the temple or the cross. Amen.*

Matthew 4:8-10

Friday, March 3

Jeff Cribbs

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*

*"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

*Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written:*

*'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

Rejecting Satan's temptations and remaining sinless, Jesus established himself as the ruler of the redeemed earth prior to beginning his public ministry. Moreover, Jesus's response to the devil is rooted in the old law as he responds with the Word of God from Deuteronomy, the book of obedience.

The third temptation of Christ is about having power and being king of your domain. Applying it to our lives, we are tempted by status, self-importance, self-exultation, dominating, or feeling superior to others.

Part of our collective failing may be because it is often difficult to discern good or evil. Most all temptations are about acquiring or feeling "good." Or even murkier, we make ethical decisions based on various levels of good. Although we do not always recognize it from our point of view, there is an omnipresent "other side" with most issues and behavior. Our personal story and justification are what get us into trouble. We forget we are not here to seek our kingdom but Christ's kingdom.

How do we know when we are serving God and not ourselves? Jesus defeated temptation, and from his example, we have the power to face our own demons. By doing so, we can live life as we are called to do, serving God. We can turn to Micah 6:8, calling us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Jesus rejecting earthly power for a greater power gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Standing up for and working to improve the plight of the poor, disadvantaged, oppressed, forgotten, and underprivileged is central to our calling as children of God. Collectively, the community of believers inherits and carries on this responsibility as we live into living for and serving others.

*Good and gracious Lord, help me see the good and evil in my life more clearly. Please give me the power to reject immediate gratification. Instead, help me recognize how to use my God-given gifts and blessings to serve your kingdom. Amen*

Romans 5:15  
Saturday, March 4  
Anonymous

*But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!*

I recently attended a retreat focused on "Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging." One thing I noticed immediately was that the word "Equality" was absent from the title. But after exploring Romans 5:15 I have discovered why. Equality is not part of God's economy. Equity is.

Equality has to do with making sure everyone receives the same amount of something; resources spread evenly among the group. Equity is making sure everyone has what they need to end at the same point.

Sin came into the world through one man, Adam. Adam made a choice. From that choice came judgment resulting in condemnation for us all. But the gift of grace, God's loving response to humanities offenses, results in our justification. If, by a single person's offense, death came to the entire creation, how much greater is the gift to all who openly receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness which comes through the one man, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

God's dispensation of grace is completely unequal, which makes my encounter with Jesus here challenging. I thank God for that that equity for myself, but the old Adam wants equality for those who are "worse" than I am. It's fine that they receive grace but it should obviously be less than what I receive! Maybe just enough to get them up from Dante's seventh circle of hell to maybe the second or third level but not out of hell altogether. The drunk who killed a neighbor, who on their death bed confesses their sins, asks God's forgiveness, and believes will be my neighbor in heaven? Is that fair? That someone who has lived in opposition to God all their life has the same hope of salvation that I do?

Equality would say no. My sinful human nature wants to say no. But God says a resounding YES! God's love and grace, the righteousness we have through Christ is not a pie where we each get an equal slice but more like rain that falls on everyone with no regard for worthiness or belief. It is like the seed thrown to the wind. It lands where it will. This is not a meritocracy, but a kingdom based on God's expansive love and grace. Thanks be to God!

*Faithful God, thank you for your gift of grace. May I grant it to others in the same measure as it has been given to me. Amen.*



Psalm 121:1-2  
Sunday, March 5  
Gwen Gotsch

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Sometimes – often, in fact – I wonder about who or what God is. I look up from what I’m reading on my book or laptop and stare into the empty space over the couch and ask — what? What do I see? What is the reality behind the stained-glass language I’ve heard all my life?

When, like the psalmist, I look to the mountains, I sense the vastness of time and space, the geologic forces that wrenched the peaks into place, the ancient melting glaciers and the eons of time that carved riverbeds and canyons. When I look deeper, I see the horizon where the curve of the earth drops away, always beyond my reach.

What does this grandeur have to do with me, a poor, confused creature sitting indoors on a winter morning? Pillows on the couch, books on the shelf, warm socks, the thoughts in my head – they’re all temporary, short-lived, as am I. Yet I am connected to the majesty of the mountains, the mystery of empty air and hazy horizons. The same God who caused those things to be also made me — and made me able to know this.

I look to Jesus to show the way to seek and find the help of the God who made heaven and earth. Jesus addressed God as “Abba, Father,” not an authoritarian patriarchal figure, but a close and caring parent. In God’s name, Jesus brought healing to the sick and cared for the poor and powerless. In obedience to God’s will, Jesus did not reject the way of the cross, but suffered, died and rose again to bring new life to his followers.

It is an example I draw on whenever I take a deep and grounding breath, when I need to calm my thoughts or find patience and grace, when I feel shame or worry about messing up, when I grieve over sad news in the wide world or death and illness among friends and family. The light that dawns over the oceans, that sets behind the mountain is also the light of Christ, living in me, and in you, too.

*God, creator of this world and of the universe beyond, help me to know both your wonder and your closeness and, following Jesus’ example, to reflect your light and truth to everyone I encounter. Amen.*

Genesis 12:1-2  
Monday, March 6  
Liz Hanson

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."*

Just before I started kindergarten, my family moved to Hong Kong, and on my first day of school, we moved from our hotel to a temporary apartment. As I remember it, Dad dropped me off in a taxi that morning, gave me an index card with my school bus number, and told me the name of an apartment complex. My predicament was that I would have to go home that afternoon without yet knowing where home was.

Convinced that I would miss the bus or miss my stop and find myself adrift and alone in a foreign city, I approached a relatively simple task with something less than calmness and fortitude. Mercifully, a patient, unflappable teacher's aide got me onto the right bus with time to spare. I watched anxiously from a window seat as the bus wound its way along its route and wondered where to get off. The apartment complex Dad had named was enormous, with stops at multiple identical buildings. All I could do was scan the crowd of parents waiting at each one, praying that I would recognize my own. Finally, there was Dad. I got off the bus, and he took me home.

In these verses, Abram doesn't even get an index card. God commands him to leave everything he knows and go "to the land that I *will* show you." The future tense sticks out to me: God doesn't tell Abram what land it is, how far away it is, or how long it will take him to get there (spoiler alert: it's gonna be a while). God's promise requires Abram to dwell a long time with uncertainty. But the uncertainty makes it no less a promise.

We're inclined to look for encounters with Christ more in the destination or the fulfillment of the promise than in the space of uncertainty preceding it: once God shows us the place, once we get to the blessing, *then* we'll see him. We look for Christ at every stop, but he's been with us all along. In entering into our humanity, he has also entered into our uncertainty and all the fears that go with it. In the times of anxious journeying or wandering, before God has shown us the place, Christ encounters *us*, even if we don't yet realize it—or realize how the encounter is shaping us. We can trust God to show us the place and fulfill the promise, knowing that Christ goes with us the whole way.

*Dear Lord, help us to recognize your presence when we are still on our way to the places that you will show us, and give us your peace. Amen.*

John 3:3-4  
Tuesday, March 7  
Craig Mindrum

*Jesus answered [Nicodemus],*

*“Truly, truly, I tell you, unless a person is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

*Nicodemus said to him,*

*“How can anyone be born after growing old?*

*Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”*

There’s a funny kind of tension running through the third chapter of John as Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, comes to speak with Jesus. Jesus wasn’t on great terms with the Pharisees, as you may know, so the conversation is a bit stilted and blunt. (Jesus even insults Nicodemus at one point.)

Nicodemus begins with what seems to be a polite remark, the sort of easy praise you might give someone you’re visiting at the beginning of a conversation, trying to get off on the right foot: “Jesus, we know you’re a great Rabbi because of all your miracles and signs.” Oooh, wrong thing to say and actually pretty sarcastic, and Jesus knows it. It’s exactly those miracles and signs that the Pharisees do not believe. One can almost imagine Jesus narrowing his eyes in response as he drops on Nicodemus entirely out of context (really, verse three is a total non sequitur) a huge and profound teaching that one may well argue is central to the whole Christian experience of salvation: Unless you can be re-born, you’re not going to be able to understand what the kingdom of God is even all about. You won’t believe my miracles and signs, Jesus may be thinking, so try this one on for size.

Jesus gets the reaction he wanted. Nicodemus is a bit stunned, rocked back on his heels. “You mean I have to climb back into my mother’s womb and be born a second time? What’s that all about?” No, it’s a metaphor, Jesus might have replied. Try to stay with me, Nicodemus.

Jesus never explains the metaphor, so take some time today to consider it. What do you think it means to be “born anew”? What has to die?

I think it’s the self, our ego, that has to die. Our need to impose our will on the world. Our drive to always win, to place our needs over the needs of other people and of the entire world. An entire host of preconceptions—hard and fixed ways of thinking—obscure our vision, preventing us from seeing the kingdom of heaven: the glory that is around us all the time.

*Lord, help us every day to die to our selfish desires and to be born anew. Amen.*

John 3:8

Wednesday, March 8

Dick Martens

*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

I was twenty-five years old and backpacking through East Asia on a shoestring. My journey took me to Osaka, Japan, to see the World's Fair. Because there were no reasonable accommodations in Osaka, literally hundreds of us young travelers were camped out in the airport by night, making trips to the Fair by day.

I had befriended an American, Joe Jackson, and a Chinese man from Hong Kong, Alan Chen. Typically, we took the train from the airport to the Fair and back, but one night we stayed for the fireworks show and missed the last train. We decided to take a taxi back to the airport. None of us spoke Japanese and there was no meter in the taxi.

As we neared the airport, we asked the driver how much the fare was. In his best English, the driver said an outrageous number of Yen. We asked him to repeat it. He replied with the same outrageous number, a number more than the three of us could pay. Joe was angry and started yelling at the driver, who drove the car past the airport into points unknown. We asked the driver where he was going. No response.

Several minutes later the driver stopped the taxi in a busy neighborhood and got out. We also got out and Joe continued yelling at the driver. A crowd began circling us. Joe was yelling in English and the driver was yelling back in Japanese. More people joined the crowd. Alan and I were quietly standing near the taxi as Joe and the driver went at it.

As I stood there, a Japanese man came up to me and whispered in my ear in perfect English: "You are in a bad neighborhood. Take this money. Pay the driver and get out." With that, he stuck hundreds of yen in my hand and left. I did exactly as he said and the driver safely returned us to the airport.

I am still in awe recounting this story. Dressed like a stranger in Japan, God inexplicably entered my life. Like the wind - or the Spirit - in today's devotion, from whence it cometh or goeth, we do not know. We only know that God is there, abiding with us. Watching over us. Even encountering us.

*Gracious God, we thank you for your abiding presence in our lives. Amen.*

John 3:14-15  
Thursday, March 9  
Krista Kaplan

*“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”*

Early one January morning, I awoke to devastating news: a dear friend’s daughter had been critically injured in a car accident and would not survive. Immediately I reached out to express heartbreak and to offer love and support. Yet a storm of pain engulfed me – shock; grief for my friend and her family; anger at the other driver; anxiety over the fragility of life; and most of all, helplessness.

This Gospel reading showed me a way out. Jesus first refers to a curious story from the Book of Numbers. Near the end of the Israelites’ years of wandering in the wilderness, God sent them poisonous serpents to punish them for their impatience and ingratitude. After many died from serpent bites, the survivors repented and asked Moses to intercede. Rather than remove the serpents, God instructed Moses to create a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten by a real serpent would look at the bronze serpent and survive.

On first reading, this tale smacks of idolatry. But God did not give any magical power to the bronze serpent itself. To the contrary, the image symbolized God’s own healing power and served to remind the Israelites to return to him alone for sustenance.

Through this story, Jesus foretells his own role in God’s plan of redemption. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent, so too would Jesus be lifted up – *i.e.*, crucified, then resurrected. Through the lifting up of the bronze serpent, God offered the Israelites salvation from physical death. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God offers all of us salvation from eternal death. This salvation comes not from within, but from God, through his infinite love and redeeming grace.

Reflecting on this message, I realized that I felt helpless because I was trying to overcome my pain alone – an impossible task. Turning to God, I prayed for healing and strength. As the tears flowed, I felt divine love and warmth envelope me and begin to dissolve the tension that been gripping me. These days I continue to reach out to my friend and her family, and I try to support them in meaningful ways. As they proceed on their long journey of healing, I pray that God’s love and grace will lift them up every step of the way.

*Dear God, through your Word, you remind us to look to you alone for sustenance and healing. As you lifted up Jesus for our salvation, we pray that you will lift us up every day, so that we may live in service to you and others. Amen.*



John 3:16-17  
Friday, March 10  
Bruce Modahl

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

We often miss the quotation marks around this famous passage of Scripture. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Jesus makes promises to him. You can count the promises in the above passage.

I picture Jesus narrowing his gaze upon Nicodemus alone. I see Jesus extending a hand to him, perhaps even a hand upon his shoulder as he promises, "God loves you so very much Nicodemus. God loves you so much that he gave his only Son so that you might be saved through him."

Nicodemus would come to know, as we know, Jesus' promises lead him to the cross and then to a joyful resurrection on the first day of a new creation.

Jesus invites us to trust these promises and to believe the Promise Giver. When we do so we enjoy and make use of Christ's benefits: forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy, life eternal, and more.

Sometimes we don't trust the promises or the Promise Giver. We wander into the far country. The far country is the landscape we inhabit when we hang our hearts on something or someone other than God. It is the sandy terrain upon which we trust the promises the world holds out to us. It is the territory in which we fear something or someone other than God. These false promises quickly tarnish and disappoint.

But even the far country is a land that is, in the words of one author, Christ-haunted. In the times I have wandered off into the far country, I always had the sense that I was being stalked by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reminds us of God's promises. The Spirit of God employs means such as those who speak the Word to us, and by the water we see in the baptismal font as we pass by. In those waters the Spirit marked us with the cross of Christ. We may be wandering in the far country, but we answer the altar call anyway. We are hungry. Christ's body and blood lure us home.

*Heavenly Father, by your Holy Spirit's power make us promise bearers and inspire us to make use of Christ's benefits. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Romans 4:13  
Saturday, March 11  
Rev. Ole Schenk

*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.*

Where are you? What's the quality of the terrain where you encounter Christ? Today's verse from Romans insists on just how expansive that question can be: encountering Christ through the promises of God's word opens up for faith nothing less than what Paul names as "inheriting the world." This is grandiose to be sure! But we need not jump immediately to delusions of power and grandeur. This is Lent after all. Encountering Christ means you and I are no longer at the center of the terrain.

I often feel that the terrain where I try to find myself is hopelessly divided up without any wholeness: screens of phone and computer, immediate tasks that weigh up so fast with care and responsibility, emotions inescapably gnawing away at me. When Troy and I hiked along the intricate rocks and wind-swayed pine trees of the Shawnee Forest, the sun played gleaming chords upon the rocks and tree shadows cast silhouettes far ahead of us. I felt for a moment I belonged to a terrain that welled up gratitude within me.

Through the encounter with Christ in the living words that rise to meet us from the pages of Scripture, you and I, we are so *graced* to belong to such an expansive terrain: a forest of crosses endured by all the saints who've traveled the way before us and sojourn with us now, the saints who've crossed that creek of baptism and who daily pass the rough hills that plunge us down in dying to sin, and the gleaming of the rocks rising on the steps in faith. That forest of crosses springs new green reaching-out needles that sway in the breezes of the Spirit's power, and the shadows these trees cast overshadow ahead of us all the false gods and idols and the depths of sin and despair that would try to claim and conquer us. In Lent, perhaps, it's the roughness of the terrain of discipleship that grows with firm profile. Though through baptism you and I belong to Christ, this is Christ's own way, which cannot be smoothness and ease even if it's truly fully good.

*Holy God, I seek you. May your word call me with all the cares I carry out onto the terrain that your word creates before, behind, and all around me. Give to me the formation of repentance and the perseverance in hope that I need today. Amen.*

Psalm 95:1  
Sunday, March 12  
Rev. Bob Shaner

*“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;  
let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation.”*

This first verse in Psalm 95 is best understood in its historical context, six centuries before Christ, where its message is addressed to THE WHOLE PEOPLE of God — a message that speaks to our day. The people had strayed from their commitment and devotion to God and were now exiled in Babylon. Struggling and dwindling, they were adrift. The once proud, expanding, mighty fabric (God’s chosen, the twelve tribes of Israel likened to be as numerous as the stars) were becoming a remnant — a shell of their former self. The grand, royal days of King David were past. They had found other allegiances, other gods. As in our time, more “non’s” than believers comprised the larger community. The covenant faith of Abraham and Sarah, diminished in number, was in shambles. What kind of message could reach an improvised people, shake this trend, and awaken them from lethargy? How could the shrinking faithful be nourished and strengthened, not just to endure and survive, but thrive...to be renewed, emboldened, equipped, and empowered in a world indifferent to God’s purposes?

Whether to ancient Israel or us, God continues to speak through the psalmist not in some privatized spiritual sense to a single individual but to THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD. The psalmist is not using some introspective, meditative, withdrawal, or seclusive language but rather is speaking in IMPERATIVE language with verbs of action. The message is not to be avoided or evaded or trivialized, but to be lived vibrantly in and through the faithful for the sake of the world:

COME...  
SING FOR JOY...  
SHOUT ALOUD to the rock of our salvation...

COME, a call for action — communal behavior to be “lived out.” In the sanctuary, yes, but also in the world! SING FOR JOY — let the faith be known! SHOUT ALOUD — boldly speak the good news in terms that the world can see and hear — especially the song of justice and freedom, the music of redemptive love of neighbor, the melody that embraces the migrant, the marginal and the refugee, as well as the joyful chorus proclaiming peace and ecological harmony.

Now in our “Lenten season” at Grace we are preparing again for “the feast of victory” that only God can bring out of the suffering, scandalous death of Jesus. Even in these days of a contracting church in a culture that worships self and adores pleasure, God speaks through the psalmist in imperative, action language, evoking a behavior the world needs: COME, SING FOR JOY, SHOUT ALOUD to the rock of our salvation.

*O Savior of the world whose mighty deeds provide the message of our song, speak to us again through the psalmist that we might COME and SING for joy, making A LOUD NOISE to the rock of our salvation. Embolden us to reach out with good news to the impoverished, to embrace all in need, and to invite others to the living waters of forgiveness where bread can be found for the journey. Amen*

Exodus 17:6-7

Monday, March 13

Anonymous

*I [God] will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*

I cannot count the number of times I have asked that same question; "Is God even here right now?" As a child I often heard "God will provide" as if it were some magical mantra. In first grade, when my father was in seminary, this concept went from abstract to a very concrete reality. My dad was a full-time seminary student, working part time. My mother was home with 4 children (2yrs-14yrs). As Christmas approached, money was scarce. Seminary tuition for dad and private school tuition for 4 kids was due, along with rent, food, car, etc. There was little left for milk much less Christmas.

My mother, being "fed-up-with-whining-children" declared "if you all can behave for the next 5 days, we will have pizza on Friday." We quickly shut up. Mom was certain she would not have to keep this promise. Well, Friday came, and we had been very good. Where was this magical pizza to come from when she could not afford a gallon of milk?

That day, my father went to pay his tuition only to find a zero balance, his tuition paid in full by an anonymous donor. He raced home, grabbing the mail on his way in, to discover a plain white envelope with no return address with a \$100 bill inside, wrapped in plain paper. The paper said, "Merry Christmas."

We had pizza for dinner. And there was greater appreciation for God's providence around the table that night, as well as a lot of wondering about those anonymous people who supported us as my father fulfilled his call into ministry. God provided for our needs in most unexpected way.

I continue to wander, displease, challenge, and anger God. I continue to shout, "Where are you?!" And when I stop shouting and listen, I can hear that still small voice that says "I'm right here. I never left. I will see you through this." And I rest in that miraculous reality.

*Faithful God, remind me daily of your presence in my life. Help me to trust that I am not alone but am held close in your arms. And that you know my needs even in the small moments of life. In Jesus name. Amen.*

John 4:9-10

Tuesday, March 14

Wendy Will

*The Samaritan woman said to him,*

*"You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman.*

*How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)*

*Jesus answered her,*

*"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink,*

*you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."*

The Bible, the word of God, always seems to meet me in my need. Being assigned John 4:9,10 to focus on today had me reading and rereading the verses. It is an exchange between Jesus and a woman from Samaria. Different translations offered more insights into the words and meanings. *The Message* offered me a phrase that spoke to me and touched my heart. Jesus speaks about "the generosity of God".

Lent is a time to think about the love that God pours out through Jesus on the cross in death, the defeat of death, sin, and the resurrection. Oh, the generosity of God!

God shows that generosity in the little life adventures as well as the gift of salvation. Last week my husband Corwin, and I had the blessing of watching two granddaughters, ages 4 and 6, while their parents had a getaway. The girls would especially miss their parents right before bedtime. We would close the day with a time together, reading a short devotion, discussion and prayer time. Talking about God's love, themes of friendship, family and the day's experiences were times we all looked forward to sharing. Closing with prayers of thanks and the Lord's Prayer became a ritual that we enjoyed. But, more than that, the girls shared the generosity that is in their lives. They were counting the blessings that came from their loving God. Sleep came easily and swiftly for their focus was on God's gracious gifts.

God is persistent and wants to break through to our hearts. In verse 10 Jesus speaks about giving us fresh, living water. What do I thirst for? Where do I search? God is the one who offers fresh, living water. Continuing the habit of closing my day with words from God and the naming of blessings is an addition to my Lenten journey. I pray, like the little girls, to thirst for God and God's peace.

*God, your generosity is limitless. Refresh me every day with your living water so I may reflect your light and love to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.*



John 4:13-14  
Wednesday, March 15  
Lance Wilkening

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

During a trip to Utah last year my wife, Stephanie, and I went on several hikes in the national parks there. To survive in the arid desert heat, you are advised to bring several liters of water with you. We carried this water in packs on our backs, pausing often to drink from a tube, making sure we stayed hydrated. But the amount of water each person can carry is limited, and before every hike we had to refill our backpacks.

On the same trip, we visited Lake Powell and saw boat docks sitting eerily abandoned in the desert, left high and dry as the lake shrinks because of a decades-long drought and the demands of millions of downstream residents who were drawn to that region by the promise of open space and plentiful sunshine, but who are now faced with the reality that water is a limited resource that must be conserved.

In contrast to the physical water on which our bodies depend, the Living Water Jesus describes to the Samaritan woman is limitless. It is abundant, not subject to climate change or the vagaries of human engineering. This Living Water is constant, always springing forth, "gushing," unstoppable. What is this Living Water? Jesus doesn't specifically define it for the woman, but to me it is salvation, comfort, forgiveness, hope in times of desperation. Turning to the scriptures at low points in my life. Returning to the Word regularly to keep myself refreshed. Sharing this Living Water with others through words and actions. It is the mysterious but essential substance that somehow never runs out, always available to sustain me even when I don't realize I need it.

*Generous God, thank you for providing this Living Water and the promise of eternal life in Christ for those who drink of it. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

John 4:23-24  
Thursday, March 15  
Phyllis Kersten

*Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*

Today's passage is our third excerpt this Lent from the story of Jesus' conversation with a nameless Samaritan woman. Almost from the beginning, the two are engaged in a theological discussion. Extraordinary – for it was taboo for a Jew to speak to a woman in public, let alone to engage her in a religious discussion! When Jesus offers the woman “living water,” she doesn't get what's really being offered to her, the gift of eternal life. The woman believes, however, that Jesus must be a prophet because of what he knows about her private life.

In today's verses the woman raises the main issue that has caused a rift between Samaritans and Jews – where Samaritans worshipped, on Mt. Gerizim, instead of in Jerusalem. But Jesus declares that the essential question is not *where* to worship, but *whom* – God the Father, “in spirit and in truth.” Then Jesus, who later in John says of himself, “I am the Way, *the Truth*, and the Life,” reveals himself to the Samaritan woman in his first “I am” saying, as “the Messiah” of both Samaritans and Jews.

What this encounter story is about is God's desire to end the enmity and divisions between people. Encounters at wells are the site where Jewish patriarchs met their marriage partners. Now at Jacob's well Jesus declares God's love for Samaritans and all who are still separated from God today.

I could easily name on one hand 50-plus women at Grace who have been transformed by Christ's love into loving others. There's Pat who invites individuals who live in her building to come to Grace to worship with her. There are all those who weekly partner with Harmony members to staff their food pantry. And the women and their spouses who welcome refugees at O'Hare and furnish places for them to live. And the young adults and retirees who tutor at Harmony. Plus, those who prepare and deliver Grace Care meals to folks like me. And, I suspect, last, but not least, there's *you!*

*Lord God, help us in our every encounter to love others. In Jesus' name. Amen*

John 4:41-42  
Friday, March 17  
Rev. David R. Lyle

*And because of his words many more became believers.*

*They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."*

I think his name was Brian, but I honestly can't remember. After all, I was only five years old, and I only knew him for a week. I was a first-time Bible camper, attending family camp with my parents and brother. Brian was a cool camp counselor whose blond hair emerged wildly from underneath a dilapidated San Diego Padres baseball cap.

Why do I remember Brian, or whatever his name was? Because I was a five-year-old kid with a broken arm and a crippling speech impediment, and he took the time to get to know me anyway. In my long, winding faith journey, Brian is one of the earliest landmarks I remember. He helped me to know that, in spite of everything about myself I thought was wrong or not good enough, Jesus loved me.

I don't really know Brian. I'm not even sure I know his name. But because of him, I know Jesus.

I wish we knew the name of the woman at the well. Who was she? John doesn't bother telling us. What John does tell us is that she told other people about Jesus. At first, they believe because of her testimony. Later, they believe because they meet Jesus for themselves. She fades into the background of the story, her work of connecting complete.

I don't know what happened to the woman at the well after the fourth chapter of John. I don't know what happened to Brian after he left camp at the end of the summer of 1981. I do know both these saints brought people to Christ. And I know that even though I don't know their stories, Jesus does.

We don't know what will happen when we share Jesus with others. We may lose the thread of the story. But God doesn't. Thanks be to God for those who shared Jesus with us. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to share Jesus with others.

*God of grace, thank you for drawing us into the story of your Son. May we lose ourselves in that story as we share it with others. Amen.*

Romans 5:3-5  
Saturday, March 18  
Dan Lehmann

*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

The hope that abides in my heart and mind is found on the cross and empty tomb—Jesus' death and resurrection. It is at those places where I find our Lord and Savior, and the blessed assurance of life eternal with God.

It is through his suffering, endurance and character during his path to the cross that hope finds its way into my life. My personal experiences with those three factors pale in comparison with that of Jesus.

Still, I draw strength from his example to handle trials that invade my world. Perhaps the most moving and tangible encounters with Jesus from this text for me are housed in the arts depicting his final days: the suffering on the cross, at the table of his final meal with the disciples, in the garden praying over the course of betrayal about to come, the finality of his human life in the arms of Mary, at the site of the open tomb.

My faith springs from the grace of God, captured in Hebrews 11:1—"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It is supported and strengthened in the life and trial of Jesus and reinforced by the works of Michelangelo, Picasso, di Vinci, Watanabe and more.

Through Jesus' example, I aspire to emulate him in my daily life: bearing burdens, living through hard times, doing the right thing despite it appearing to be impossible, and clinging to the truth that we are justified by faith in the grace of our God through Jesus Christ.

Our journey this Lent is to yet again peer into the life and teachings of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and how we can be more like him.

*O Lord, may our Lenten observance prove to be a blessing to us and to all those around us. In Jesus name. Amen.*